

STATE HISTORICAL
SOCIETY OF IOWA
IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 53 | Number 4 (Fall 1994)

pps. 395-397

"All Will Yet Be Well": the Diary of Sarah Gillespie Huftalen, 1873-1952

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 1994 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use,
not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

"All Will Yet Be Well": the Diary of Sarah Gillespie Huftalen, 1873-1952." *The Annals of Iowa* 53 (1994), 395-397.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.9862>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

Lee and Gordon Parks's urban images. In discussing such volumes as Archibald MacLeish's *Land of the Free*, Herman Clarence Nixon's *Forty Acres and Steel Mules*, Sherwood Anderson and Edwin Rosskam's *Home Town*, and Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam's *12 Million Black Voices*, all of which were based on the FSA collection, as well as a variety of public exhibits of the agency's photos, the author concludes, "the innovative quality of the FSA black file was hardly given its due. . . . Recognition of black individuality and diversity tended to be lost in the various currents of the 1930s and 1940s: populism and romanticism, New Deal boosterism and wartime nationalism, not to mention outright racism" (255). Even the two most prominent blacks associated with the collection failed to escape these currents. Natanson notes that while Gordon Parks "experienced discrimination directly, the reality of segregated theaters, restaurants, bus stations, and street-car stands, as well as public bathrooms, parks, playgrounds, and schools was not to be found in Parks's Washington documentation" (186). And in *12 Million Black Voices*, Richard Wright, "a black author who knew much better," repeated "the white tendency that had proven so stultifying over the years, that of treating the black millions as a monolithic mass" (247).

Readers interested in popular culture, photography, the Great Depression and World War II, and in African-American history will find this well-constructed book worthwhile. Midwesterners will particularly like the discussions of *12 Million Black Voices* (because of its Chicago base) and the Rothstein images of the 1939 Missouri Bootheel sharecroppers roadside strike.

"All Will Yet Be Well": The Diary of Sarah Gillespie Huftalen, 1873-1952, by Suzanne L. Bunkers. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993. xvi, 325 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$46.95 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY BARBARA HANDY-MARCHELLO, UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA

Sarah Gillespie was eleven when her mother, Emily Hawley Gillespie, gave her a diary. The diary became her trusted confidante, keeping records of visits, chores, gifts given and received, and especially anything that disturbed Sarah. Emily taught Sarah to keep a diary, just as she taught her the skilled work of house and barnyard. Emily sometimes picked up Sarah's diary, read it, wrote a response, and asked Emily to write in her own diary when she became too ill to do so. This openness suggests that Huftalen's diary was less a secret hiding place for her most intimate thoughts than a means of commu-

nicating thoughts and feelings that she could not express in any other way. Sarah's diary overlaps her mother's, then continues through the life that Emily tried to prepare Sarah to live. (Near the end of her life, Sarah copied and edited both her and her mother's diaries before donating them to the State Historical Society of Iowa. Judy Nolte Lensink edited Emily's diary and the University of Iowa Press published it in 1989 as "*A Secret to Be Buried:*" *The Diary of Emily Hawley Gillespie, 1858-1888.*)

Sarah Gillespie grew up on a farm near Manchester, Iowa. She attended local schools and earned a teaching certificate while still in her teens. In 1892 she married William (Billy) Huftalen, a man twenty-seven years older than she. During her marriage she continued to teach and began to write articles on the special circumstances of rural schools. Throughout every phase of her career—as school teacher, as Page County Superintendent of Schools, as a college teacher at Upper Iowa University, and as methods teacher in Muscatine High School's Normal Department—she focused on rural schools. After her forced retirement at age seventy, Huftalen, who had no children, returned to the farm where she grew up to keep house for her brother Henry.

Sarah's diary offers the reader a broad slice of rural Iowa life across the invisible border of the twentieth century. From farm girl to rural school teacher, Huftalen's life was typical of young women of her time and station. But the diary also offers something very unusual. Huftalen takes us inside the farmhouse and the family, where the reader is exposed to the factors that influenced the way the Gillespie family made decisions about work, money, religion, politics, and extended family relationships. The murky realm that historians often stumble through or merely avoid is laid bare, and the reality, for this family, is at once fascinating and repelling.

Sarah Gillespie's parents' marriage was not a happy one. Her father, James Gillespie, ruled the household harshly, withholding money and affection from his wife and children, taking out his anger on the livestock, and sometimes threatening suicide. Sarah's mother became increasingly debilitated as the distress of these conflicts took its toll on her health. As Sarah grew into her teens, she became more aware of her father's anger and the effect of his moods on her mother. She came to see the family as divided, the children and their mother defending themselves from James and planning their lives around him or without him.

In midlife Sarah and Henry inherited the farm from their father. After Billy Huftalen died, Sarah returned to the farm to keep house for Henry, who never married. The move was disastrous. Henry was abusive to Sarah in much the same way their father had been to their mother. Her needs were ignored, her work and words ridiculed. She

moved to Muscatine but continued to spend summers on the farm, trying to fix up the house, barn, and outbuildings which Henry neglected. In 1935, when she retired from teaching, Sarah moved back to the farm with two ideas in mind. She would keep house for Henry, and she would claim her right to live on and earn her living from the farm. Henry remained abusive, and Sarah spent the last years of her life in fear and distress.

Sarah had learned from her mother and female neighbors and relatives that the proper family role for a woman was in service to others. She practiced that role as teacher, daughter, wife, and, finally, as sister. During the years she lived with Henry, although she continued to believe that "all will yet be well," she began to question the idea of a woman's blind duty to her family. Ten years after moving in with Henry, Sarah asked "if it was my duty as I thought to try to make a home for him" (238). In spite of her doubts, she stayed on the farm with Henry until failing health forced her to move to more comfortable quarters.

Perhaps the most important question the diary raises is why Sarah stayed with Henry when she had the means to leave the farm and live by herself. Unlike women with few resources, Sarah did have other options, and it is difficult to understand why she felt so committed to following her mother's example. Her experience suggests that the enculturation of women—even women of means who adhered to principles of equality—supported acceptance of a prescribed social role, even if their faith in the propriety of that role ("all will yet be well") was unrewarded or the results were clearly detrimental to their well-being.

What is fascinating about this diary to the student of history is not what we might look for in other diaries: the passing of time as marked by events, technological changes, or changes in the role of the rural school teacher. It is the absence of change, the life patterns of their parents that Sarah and Henry seem compelled to re-live. Although Sarah could not understand Henry's behavior, it is apparent to the reader that Sarah and Henry learned well the lessons their parents taught them.

Suzanne Bunkers edited this diary with a gentle hand. She never imposes her own thoughts or words over Sarah's, although the temptation must have been strong at times. As editor she introduces the diary as a literary form and fills in the biographical gaps. I would have preferred that some of the extensive information in the endnotes were inserted into the chapters or included in introductory essays to the chapters. The form Bunkers used, however, erects no barriers between Huftalen and the reader.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.